

Zoos and Animal Welfare
Prepared for the Participants of the SAZARC 2008 Meeting by Dr. Karen Sausman,
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Zoological gardens were created centuries ago to meet what seems to be a deep universal need of people to peer at the endless diversity of life on our planet and speculate about it? strange creatures from strange places. Ancient books are filled with the science of that day giving explanations of why creatures are, what they are or why they act the way they act or live where they live. It seems the human animal has always been fascinated by the natural world, not just to eat or keep from being eaten, but with a true sense of wonder. And we still, in our core, have that sense of wonder. And a fair portion, if not all of the visitors to our zoos, have that same sense of wonder, but it is buried under the pressure of day to day living in an essentially urban and artificial world.

While it is critical that zoos and aquariums are seen to be leaders in all aspects of the science of conservation, our original mission has remained the same over centuries as a place to respond to a core need of people to somehow connect with wild things and wild places. Of course, centuries ago these collections were the private property of rulers established to satisfy their curiosity and possibly impress their subjects and rivals. That model was still being used 30-40 years ago when zoos were judged on how many rare creatures they had in their collection and the "collection plan" consisted of the species that the "ruling director" liked the most and met his "core need" to connect with.

From that very ancient need the modern zoo and aquarium has evolved and is still evolving today towards using that passion to sustain endangered creatures and their habitats as well as educating the next generation of conservationists.

The wildlife and wild places of our planet are facing so many threats from so many directions habitat loss, pollution, and global warming, to name a just a few. Yet we know in our minds and hearts that we can and must do whatever is within the power of our facilities to reconnect people with wild places while, at the same time, using our resources to save species and habitats in the "wild" or what is left of it.

We spend hours creating interpretive signs and developing interpretive programming in order to teach our visitors about wildlife and conservation but what is the real message that our facilities are giving people at the emotional level? where it really counts? Are the animals healthy and in naturalist and behaviourally enriching exhibits? or do we still have some small, sterile or, worse yet, dirty exhibit

yards. I guarantee you that our visitors will take away from your zoo far more visual responses to the animals and exhibits than factual messages. And those experiences better be positive, because those are the experiences that really count.

The highest standards of animal welfare must be core to what we do and to how we present the creatures in our care to our visitors. Our exhibits must evoke positive emotions a sense of awe and wonder a sense of fascination and the realization that these creatures are an important part of our lives. We do not need our facilities to evoke emotions of pity for the caged creatures or, worse yet, of human superiority and dominion over wildlife leading to disregard and even animal cruelty. Our visitors are having deep emotional learning experiences as they visit our facilities. The only question is whether those experiences will foster a true appreciation and, for a few, even a passion, for wildlife or whether their experiences at our facilities lead them to feel wildlife are just curious but unimportant objects in their world. All the signage and programs in the world cannot erase poor exhibits and inhumane treatment either real or perceived, stereotypic behaviours and even dirty grounds and restrooms. The mixed message ends up to be a negative message. And we have lost the opportunity to make the positive emotional connection between our visitors and wildlife.

I believe zoos in Asia and on other continents of great biodiversity have the opportunity of making an incredible impact on the conservation of their native species and the world's biodiversity by developing local conservation programs totally encompassing the local culture and economics. By creating new satellite zoos or nature centers or upgrading existing facilities in biologically important regions, the institutions in Asia, Africa, and South America can play a tremendous role in involving local people in conservation action.

As more and more of the world's population live in urban areas far removed from wildlife and wild places, it will be up to us to reawaken that sense of wonder that lies within each of us, no matter which continent or culture. Never for a moment doubt that we have the power to inspire the next generation of conservationists in a way that no television film or computer screen can ever do. As we sit here today we need to always keep in mind that the next generations of wildlife biologists, conservationists and even zoo and aquarium directors are running around in our zoo. Are we fostering their innate fascination for wild creatures and wild places? I hope so.